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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 MINSK 001284

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TAGS: PGOV PHUM PINR BO
SUBJECT: CIVIL SOCIETY LEADERS DISCUSS IMPACT OF
MILINKEVICH'S CANDIDACY

Ref: A) Minsk 1205 B) Minsk 1236

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Classified by Ambassador George Krol for Reasons 1.4 (B,D)

¶1. (C) Summary: Since the October 2 nomination of Aleksandr Milinkevich by the democratic congress, Emboffs have conducted a series of meetings with civil society leaders and political analysts to assess the significance of the democratic congress and of Milinkevich's presidential bid. Most observers viewed the congress and Milinkevich's nomination as a catalyzing event but noted the significant obstacles that remain in the way of democratic change in 2006, including continued fragmentation in the opposition camp, Lukashenko's strong popular support, and Russia's likely backing of the Lukashenko regime. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) Emboffs have met with various civil society leaders with opposing views during the past three weeks to assess the impact of Aleksandr Milinkevich's 10+ coalition nomination for presidency in the 2006 elections (ref A). This report will draw mainly from comments made by:

-- Andrey Vardomatsky, Director of Novak Opinion Research Center
-- Aleksandr Voitovich, former Speaker of Upper Chamber of Parliament and possible presidential contender in the 2006 elections
-- Anatoly Federov, close advisor to Voitovich
-- Petr Martsev, owner of independent newspaper BDG
-- Vladimir Labkovich, member of human rights NGO Vyasnna
-- Valentin Stepanovich, member of Vyasnna
-- Oleg Gulak, deputy in human rights NGO Belarus Helsinki Committee
-- Andrey Sannikov, International Coordinator for human rights NGO Charter 97
-- Andrey Federov, political analyst
-- Valery Karbalevich, political analyst
-- Andrey Sudaltsev, political analyst and advisor to Chair of Belarusian Congress of Independent Trade Union Aleksandr Yaroshuk

Democratic Congress Exceeded Expectations

¶3. (C) Civil society leaders generally considered the October 1-2 democratic congress a success. The event was highly organized, professional, and represented a significant achievement in the opposition movement. Andrey Vardomatsky, who was one of the delegates at the convention, told Pol/Econ Chief on October 6 most people in

the pro-democracy camp and in the Lukashenko regime expected the congress to be poorly attended and to be rife with infighting among party leaders. (Note: Vardomatsky and others have heard that Lukashenko expected no more than a hundred delegates and guests to attend the convention, which is why he allowed it to take place in Minsk.) To everyone's surprise, high turnout of delegates and domestic and international VIPs, good press coverage in independent and foreign media, and a generally democratic election process marked the democratic convention. Human rights activist Vladimir Labkovich explained to Pol/Econ Chief in a separate meeting that although the most recent democratic congress was the fifth such congress in Belarusian history, the October 1-2 event stood out because it unified the greatest number of pro-democracy groups and leaders.

Most Say Milinkevich Is the Best Choice

¶4. (C) Most people in the NGO and human rights community are pleased with Milinkevich's candidacy. Vardomatsky and others noted it was a difficult choice to decide between Milinkevich and runner-up candidate Anatoly Lebedko because the latter is more "energetic" and experienced in politics. Milinkevich, according to several contacts, seems ill suited for stirring up the masses to oust Lukashenko (ref B). However, Vardomatsky ultimately voted for Milinkevich because Lebedko has too much "political baggage." For all his personal qualities, Lebedko has remained relatively unpopular among voters, and Vardomatsky believes this scenario will not likely change.

¶5. (C) On October 5, human rights leader Andrey Sannikov told the Ambassador and Pol/Econ chief he is also satisfied Milinkevich is the 10+ candidate. In his view, the opposition needed new blood and a new face. He considers

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the 5+ "experiment" (pre-cursor to the 10+) an utter failure, mainly because it was built relatively around hollow and unattractive political parties. Milinkevich's deep contacts in the NGO community should help the 10+ coalition attract voters. (Note: Sannikov and his Free Belarus movement have long been competitors of the 5+ and Lebedko. Sannikov stressed to Econoff that Milinkevich is the right choice because he will work with groups outside the traditional political party opposition.)

His Competitors Think Otherwise

¶6. (C) Opposition candidate and former Parliamentary Speaker Aleksandr Voitovich and his advisor Anatoly Federov recently told the Ambassador and Pol/Econ Chief they were pleased Milinkevich won the 10+ nomination, but only because Milinkevich seems the most willing to "reach a compromise" with other opposition presidential contenders. Voitovich pointed out he and several other non-party leaders, excluding likely presidential candidate Anatoly Kozulin, signed an agreement with the 10+ candidates a few days prior to the democratic convention to unite democratic forces. However, Voitovich seriously doubted any 10+ candidate other than Milinkevich would honor the agreement. Voitovich and two other members of the recently formed non-party democratic coalition, former Agricultural Minister Vasily Leonov and former MP Valery Frolov, have repeatedly told Emboffs there will likely be a single opposition candidate to face Lukashenko but this decision will not be made until later in the election process. It is clear, however, that they expect Milinkevich to realize sooner or later that he is no match for Lukashenko.

¶7. (C) Voitovich and Federov have determined Milinkevich is incapable of attracting a large share of voters

primarily because he lacks strong ties to Belarus' economic elite and to Russia, and because he maintains strong ties to a nationalistic political party, the Belarusian Popular Front (BPF). First, Federov explained the importance of appealing to and representing the nomenclature and economic elite in any successful strategy to defeat Lukashenko. According to Federov, the nomenclature is more likely to support someone like Voitovich, or even Kozulin, than Milinkevich. Other political analysts refute the notion that the nomenclature can be drawn away from Lukashenko. Political analyst Valery Karbalevich told the Ambassador on October 12 the nomenclature is not fond of Lukashenko and would probably abandon ship quickly if Lukashenko was on the verge of losing power, but it would be "pure nonsense" to think the nomenclature would risk losing their jobs and privileges for any opposition candidate this early in the game.

¶8. (C) Second, Federov believes Milinkevich will be unable to convince Russia he is a better choice than Lukashenko, mainly due to the perception Milinkevich would steer Belarus, including its economy, toward the West. Neither Federov nor Voitovich were willing to declare that Russia would look more favorably on a Voitovich candidacy; their concern was only that Milinkevich was a non-starter for the Kremlin. Finally, Voitovich believes nationalism does not play well in Belarusian politics, and the BPF's formal backing of Milinkevich will surely taint his candidacy.

Election Campaign Must Be Bold

¶9. (C) Vardomatsky, Sannikov, human rights activist Oleg Gulak and others remain concerned that Milinkevich's timid personality will limit his ability to sway voters away from Lukashenko. Sannikov stressed Milinkevich must be willing to take the necessary risks to gain voter support, even if it means falling prey to GOB repressive tactics. Gulak emphasized that frequent and massive street rallies, relentless door-to-door campaigns, and innovative use of available media outlets are necessary ingredients for an effective campaign strategy (a report on the 10+ campaign strategy and platform will be sent septel). Civil society leaders agreed that Lukashenko's tight restrictions on information dissemination and public gatherings make it extremely difficult for Milinkevich to mount a successful campaign in the next nine months, but they are convinced the secret lies in Milinkevich surrounding himself with creative, energetic people to do much of the legwork around the country.

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¶10. (C) Sannikov added the campaign message should steer clear of populism. The human rights leader maintained that voters do not want to hear promises from Milinkevich that he will "fix their houses and repair their roads; Lukashenko has this market cornered." Instead, Milinkevich should focus on serious issues such as long-term economic stability, Lukashenko's involvement in the 1999 and 2000 disappearances of prominent Belarusian activists, and a balanced economic and political policy towards Russia and the West. Clearly, the substance of Milinkevich's platform is the subject of much debate among political observers, and there are many who disagree with Sannikov's viewpoint.

"Russia Will Stick By Lukashenko"

¶11. (C) Many political observers and civil society leaders predict the Kremlin will ultimately back Lukashenko, and therefore without Kremlin backing, Milinkevich's (or any other opposition candidate's) prospects in the 2006 elections are significantly reduced. Karbalevich and

political analyst Andrey Sudaltsev agree with other observers' assessments that in the opposition there is no viable alternative to Milinkevich, but they seriously doubt the 10+ nominee will be able to attract the Kremlin's attention. Milinkevich, according to Karbalevich and Sudaltsev, is perceived by many in Belarus and Russia as a "Western project" Q i.e., someone groomed by the U.S. and EU to wrestle Belarus from the hands of Russia.

Independent newspaper owner Peter Martsev concurs with Karbalevich and Sudaltsev, adding that Lukashenko's continuation in power plays an important role in President Putin's economic, political, and military policy towards the West. Most civil society leaders conceded Lukashenko represents an embarrassment to Russia, but the Belarusian leader's hostility to the West outweighs his faults.

"It's Still Worth a Shot To Engage Russia"

¶12. (C) Vardomatsky told Emboffs other analysts overrate the ties between Lukashenko and President Putin. He maintains that Lukashenko is enough of an embarrassment to Putin that the Russian leader could be persuaded to withdraw Kremlin support for the Lukashenko regime.

Specifically, Vardomatsky recommended a combination of external and internal (i.e. within Russia) pressures be applied to Putin. On the external side, the EU and USG should emphasize to Putin that Lukashenko's reelection in 2006 would be a reflection of Putin's personal image, and Russia's future in the Group of Eight and WTO could be thrown into jeopardy. Within Russia, Vardomatsky knows of a number of intellectuals with close ties to the Kremlin. These intellectuals could be called upon to deliver a similar message to Putin. Vardomatsky refused to reveal the names of the Russian intellectuals, in part because we were meeting in his office and the Belarusian KGB was likely listening to the conversation.

"Belarusian Voters, Not Russia, Are The Determining Factor"

¶13. (C) Labkovich, Gulak, and human rights activist Valentin Stepanovich hold a different opinion on Russia's influence in the upcoming presidential elections. They agree that Lukashenko is an asset to the Putin regime, but they believe others overestimate Russia's role in Belarusian politics. Labkovich argued that, "events in Ukraine proved we don't need Russia to win over voters." He believes the 10+ should focus its efforts on reaching out to voters with an attractive message. If the opposition is successful in this endeavor, Stepanovich argued the Kremlin would likely re-evaluate its relationship with Lukashenko.

Comment

¶14. (C) Most civil society leaders and activists agree that Aleksandr Milinkevich's nomination as the 10+ presidential candidate was a significant and positive development in the opposition camp. The opposition has never before been so organized and unified.

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¶15. (C) However, all of our interlocutors made it clear that significant Q almost insurmountable Q obstacles remain in the way of democratic change in 2006. First, the strong presidential aspirations of Voitovich, Kozulin, and possibly other non-party opposition leaders clearly indicate the democratic forces will continue to suffer from fragmentation. Second, Milinkevich is an unknown quantity to the electorate, which can be considered one of his

strengths, but he must work extra hard in a repressive environment to attract voters. Third, Belarus' economy continues to grow (even if it is unsustainable), and most voters associate its growth with Lukashenko and his policies. Fourth, despite what some analysts believe, Russia's continued support for Lukashenko persuades most voters to stand by Lukashenko, or at least not stand by the opposition candidate. Overall, the opposition has a steep road to climb, but it seems that Milinkevich's nomination has started the opposition up the hill.

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